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The New Indian Express
Wishes its readers

W.H.O. ASKS COUNTRIES TO RAMP UP SURVEILLANCE AS COVID CASES SURGE

The world health agency on Sunday asked countries in Southeast Asia to increase monitoring amid an uptick in Covid-19 cases

TRACKING IS IMPORTANT AS VIRUS EVOLVES

The Covid-19 virus is evolving and is circulating in all countries globally. "While current evidence suggests that the additional public health risk posed by JN.1 (a new variant of Covid virus) is low, we must continue to track the evolution of these viruses to tailor our response," the WHO said. It urged countries to strengthen surveillance and ensure the data is shared

OVER 650 NEW CASES, 1 DEATH IN 24 HOURS

- In recent weeks, JN.1 was reported in multiple countries, and its prevalence has been increasing rapidly. Experts anticipate this variant to cause an increase in Covid-19 cases, especially since it's the winter season
- India reported 656 new Covid cases on Sunday, taking the total number of active cases in the country to 3,742. One death was reported from Kerala

220.6 cr

DOSES OF COVID VACCINES ADMINISTRED IN INDIA SO FAR, AS PER OFFICIAL DATA

CHENNAI • MADURAI • VIJAYAWADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOZHIKODE • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • BELAGAVI • BHUBANESWAR • SHIVAMOGGA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TRICHY • TIRUNELVELI • SAMBALPUR • HUBBALLI • DHARMAPURI • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILLUPURAM • KOLLAM • TADEPALLIGUDEM • NAGAPATTINAM • THRISSUR • KALABURAGI

Sports ministry stops 'hasty' WFI

IOA asked to form ad-hoc panel; under pressure, Brij Bhushan says he is leaving the sport

FIROZ MIRZA @ Chennai

THREE days after the Wrestling Federation of India had completed its election process that led to more protests by star wrestlers Sakshi Malik and Bajrang Punia, the sports minister stepped in and asked the executive committee to abstain from administering and managing day-to-day affairs of the federation.

The sports ministry took this decision on Sunday in view of the certain actions taken by the newly-elected EC after elections. The sports ministry was not happy with hasty announcement of nationals (U15 and U20). The ministry had written a letter to the Indian Olympic Association listing out its reason for such a step. The sports ministry also pointed out that the have taken "note of the compelling current situation arising out of the influence and control of the WFI's former office bearers, serious concerns have arisen about the governance and integrity of the WFI."

Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh during a press meet in New Delhi | PARVEEN NEW

Sakshi welcomes it

Sakshi Malik welcomed the WFI's suspension. "It is the first step towards something good happening. I hope the government understands more for what cause we were fighting," she said. Bajrang Punia, who had returned his Padma Shri on Friday said he would not take it back as yet

The ministry has requested IOA to form an ad-hoc committee to run the affairs of the WFI. The ministry also felt that what they have done is within the Constitution of India and provisions in the Sports Code gives them that powers.

Though many were taken by surprise, former president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, the man in the eye of the storm, apparently had an inkling of what was in the store for him. Having left for Gonda, Uttar Pradesh only on Saturday morning, Brij Bhushan returned to New Delhi in the morning even before the order was issued. As the developments throughout the day caught the wrestling fraternity off guard, the BJP member of parliament refrained from commenting until he met the party's national president JP Nadda after which he told media that he is taking retirement from the sport. Sanjay Singh, Brij Bhushan's loyalist, comfortably won the elections for the top post. P13

CLASSROOM COMFORT

Govt prohibits kids from sitting on floor in schools: Minister

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Shivamogga

TO promote the wellbeing and classroom comfort of school students, School Education and Literacy Minister **Madhu Bangarappa** on Sunday said the practice of making children sit on floors during class hours in school will be banned.

The directive, coming into effect from the next academic year, applies to all primary and high schools, both government and private grant-in-aid, and mandates the provision of benches for students sitting in classrooms.

The government will also ban children cleaning toilets. The fund allocation for maintaining school cleanliness will be increased, he added.

Explaining the reason for making benches compulsory at schools, he said that when he visited several schools during the recent legislature session in Belagavi, he sat with children, had midday meals and interacted with them. "I got the feedback from them. I felt bad when I saw children sitting on the floor during 'Nali Kali' class. I asked teachers not to wear footwear inside classrooms till new benches arrive. If we have to ensure equality, students should sit on the benches and study. The government will provide benches to government schools."

He said the government will fill up D group posts to clean toilets in schools, ensuring that children are not compelled to do it. "Forcing children to clean toilets is an inappropriate practice. While such incidents may not be widespread, they do occur in some places. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, during the recent cabinet meeting, emphasised the need to provide more facilities to schools. He also decided to fill up Group D posts," he added.

I'm a patriot or a traitor, people will decide: Simha

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Mysuru

NEARLY two weeks after the Parliament security breach, where his name surfaced for issuing passes to the intruders, Mysuru-Kodagu MP Pratap Simha on Sunday said people will decide if he is a patriot or traitor in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

Reacting to him being tagged a 'traitor' during protests demanding a probe against him for security breach, Simha said, "Since the issue is being probed, I don't want to divulge anything regarding the incident. I will leave it to the Gods and people to decide whether I am a traitor or patriot." He said, "Goddess Chamundeshwari, Goddess Cauvery, my reader fans across Karnataka who have been reading my writings for the last two decades and people in the region who have elected me twice and seen my work for the last nine-and-a-half years will give their verdict through votes in the Lok Sabha polls."

Asked whether his statement was recorded by the police, Simha said he has done whatever had to be done. "I don't have anything else to say on this."

EXPRESS READ

Jaishankar on 4-day Russia visit from today

New Delhi: While this is the second year in a row that the India-Russia Summit has not been held, EAM Dr S Jaishankar is scheduled to visit Russia for four days from Dec 25. Jaishankar will meet with DyPM and Minister of Trade and Industry, Denis Manturov, and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov | P9

Retd police officer shot dead in J&K mosque

FAYAZ WANI @ Srinagar

A retired police officer on Sunday was shot dead by terrorists while he was giving the call for morning prayer (*azaan*) in a mosque in Jammu and Kashmir's Baramulla district.

Mohammad Shafi Mir, 71, was shifted to a nearby hospital, where doctors declared him "brought dead". Immediately after the incident, a contingent of police, CRPF and army rushed to the area and launched a search operation to track down the attackers.

The postmortem of the deceased police officer has revealed that Mir was shot with a 12-bore rifle and had splinter injuries, police sources said. "We are investigating all angles including any possible rivalry," sources added. Mir, who retired as senior superintendent of police, regularly used to give the *azaan* at the local mosque.

He had retired in 2012 and was living in his native village. He is survived by wife, two sons and a daughter.

A pall of gloom descended the entire village as the news of his death spread and everyone is mourning.

Karnataka sees 106 fresh Covid-19 cases

Bengaluru: For the second consecutive day, Covid-19 positive cases in Karnataka crossed the 100-mark and stood at 106. The positivity rate jumped to 7.35%, breaching the 5%-mark, according to the health department. This is despite the low testing that is being done by the state health department. No deaths were reported | P3

THAT CHRISTMASSY FEELING

People attend the mass on Christmas Eve at St Mary's Basilica in Shivajinagar in Bengaluru on Sunday | BAGARAJA GADEKAL

Plane bound to Nicaragua can leave, rule French judges

YESHI SELI @ New Delhi

FRENCH judges on Sunday allowed the Nicaragua-bound flight carrying 303 passengers, mostly Indians, to resume its journey on Monday, according to French media. The A340 aircraft had taken off from Dubai and landed in Vatry for refuelling when it was grounded by French authorities over an anonymous tip about "human trafficking".

After authorising the aircraft, operated by Romanian company Legend Airlines, to leave, the French judges cancelled the hearings of the passengers due to irregularities in the procedure, French news broadcast television and radio network BFM TV reported.

Liliana Bakayoko, lawyer for the Romania-based airline, said the 15 crew members were questioned and released.

According to sources, most of the passengers, including minors, are from Punjab.

ANOTHER VESSEL WITH INDIAN CREW STRUCK

MAYANK SINGH @ New Delhi

A day after a Liberia-flagged merchant vessel M/V Chem Pluto carrying 21 Indian crew members came under a drone attack off the coast of Gujarat, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) said another merchant ship with 25 Indians came under attack in the southern Red Sea.

According to the US CENTCOM, the vessel, M/V SAIBABA, was hit by a one-way attack drone launched by Yemen-based Houthi militants in the southern Red Sea on Saturday. A Norwegian-flagged tanker was also similarly hit, but none of the crew members in either ship was injured. "At approximately 8 p.m. (Sanaa time), U.S. Naval Forces Central Command received reports from two ships in the Southern Red Sea that they were under attack," the US CENTCOM posted on X. US Navy's destroyer USS Laboon responded to the distress calls from the ships, it stated. The CENTCOM called M/V SAIBABA, "a Gabon-owned, Indian-flagged crude oil tanker", but Indian officials clarified it was a Gabon-flagged vessel. "These attacks represent the 14th and 15th attacks on commercial shipping by Houthi militants since October 17," the CENTCOM said.

On Saturday, the Indian Navy responded to a distress call from the merchant vessel M/V Chem Pluto, which came under a suspected drone attack. The US claimed Iran was behind Saturday's attack on M/V Chem Pluto. Citing newly released intelligence, the US said Iran was "deeply involved" in the planning of Houthi attacks and has supplied weapons to the group.

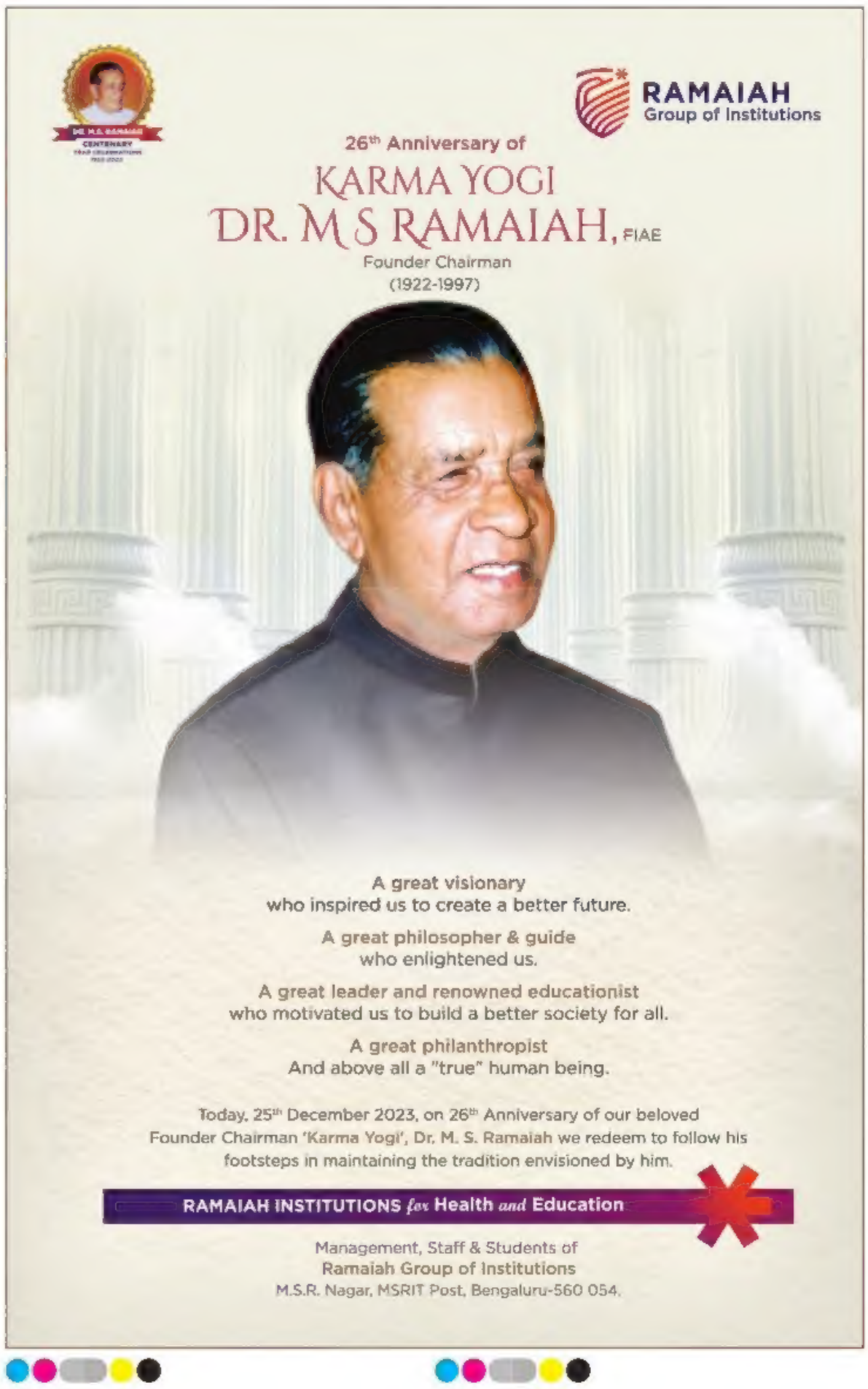
Kerehalli held for questioning X'mas decor at mall

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

RIGHT wing activist and cow vigilante Puneeth Kerehalli and four of his aides have been arrested by the Kodigehalli police after they allegedly questioned the staff of Mall of Asia in Byatarayanapura over decorating the mall for Christmas and charging Rs 200 as entry fee on Saturday.

The police said Kerehalli, president of Rashtriya Rakshana Pade, and four others went to the mall on Friday and questioned the staff for decorating the mall for Christmas. When the staff said it was the festive season, they allegedly questioned them whether they decorated the mall the same way for Hindu festivals. The accused also questioned the staff for charging ₹200 and allegedly tried to stop the visitors from entering the mall.

Despite the mall staff requesting them to leave, they allegedly used a loudspeaker asking the visitors not to enter the mall. When Stephen Victor, assistant security manager, intervened, they allegedly hurled abuses at him and accused him of supporting the mall as he is a Christian. They allegedly demanded that the mall should be decorated on January 22 when Ram Mandir will be inaugurated at Ayodhya and threatened to stage a protest in front of the mall on Christmas and New Year day, besides sloganeering 'Jai Sriram'. P4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who motivated us to build a better society for all.
A great philanthropist
And above all a "true" human being.
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